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02 August 2016

Version of attached file:

Other

Peer-review status of attached file:

Not peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Brooks, Mary M. (2015) 'Sustaining tacit and embedded knowledge in textile conservation and textile and dress collections.', in *Conscientious conservation : sustainable choices in collection care : AIC 42nd Annual Meeting, May 28-May 31, 2014, Hyatt Regency Embarcadero, San Francisco, California*. Washington: American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, pp. 1-10. The Textile Specialty Group postprints. (24).

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://www.conservation-us.org/publications/our-publications/specialty-group/textiles/tsgpostprints.V58NltIrIdV>

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SUSTAINING TACIT AND EMBEDDED KNOWLEDGE IN TEXTILE CONSERVATION AND TEXTILE AND DRESS COLLECTIONS

MARY M. BROOKS

ABSTRACT—This article explores the current paradoxical position of textile and dress collections and textile conservation in museums from an English perspective. Textile and dress exhibitions have become increasingly high profile, and conservators are being energized by an expanded vision for communicating the activity of heritage conservation, engaging with the public in different and exciting ways and making this often hidden process accessible. Nevertheless, despite many exciting initiatives, the underlying trend in the United Kingdom indicates a creeping loss of specialist textile curatorial and conservation posts. The article explores the implications of these losses on tacit and embedded knowledge and expertise and the growing threat to the long-term sustainability of textile and dress collections, particularly in the regions. It studies the reasons for these problems and considers in more detail a key issue, that of the loss of teaching needlework skills. The article argues that these issues need to be considered when planning strategies to ensure the sustainable future of textile and dress collections and related curatorial and conservation skills. It includes a case study exploring approaches to embedding sustainable expertise implemented during a Monument Fellowship at York Castle Museum, England.

SOSTENIENDO LOS CONOCIMIENTOS TÁCITOS E INCORPORADOS EN LA CONSERVACIÓN TEXTIL Y EN LAS COLECCIONES DE TELAS Y TRAJES: RESUMEN—Este documento explora la paradójica posición actual de las colecciones de telas y trajes y la conservación textil de los museos desde la perspectiva inglesa. Las exhibiciones de telas y trajes tienen un perfil cada vez más alto y entre los conservadores crece el entusiasmo por expandir la idea de comunicar las actividades que se realizan para conservar la herencia, llegando al público de maneras diferentes y atractivas y facilitándole el acceso a este proceso tradicionalmente oculto. A pesar de las numerosas iniciativas, la tendencia imperante en el Reino Unido muestra una creciente escasez de publicaciones de curadores y conservadores especializados en telas. El documento explora las implicancias de estas pérdidas sobre la experiencia y los conocimientos tácitos e incorporados, y la creciente amenaza para la sustentabilidad a largo plazo de las colecciones de telas y trajes, especialmente en las regiones. Se analizan las causas de estos problemas y se considera más en detalle un problema clave: la pérdida de enseñanza del arte de la costurería. El documento sostiene que estos temas deben ser tenidos en cuenta a la hora de planificar estrategias que garanticen el futuro sustentable de las colecciones de telas y trajes y del arte de la conservación y el curado de las telas. El escrito incluye el estudio de un caso que explora métodos para la incorporación de experiencia sustentable implementados durante una beca de estudios de monumentos en el Museo del Castillo de York, Inglaterra.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article explores some of the complex issues challenging the conservation profession in general and textile conservators in particular in terms of the sustainability of our expertise. It is, hopefully, a realistic but not too pessimistic contribution to the discussion and necessarily reflects an English perspective. It therefore focuses on the various threats to the long-term sustainability of textile and dress collections in the United Kingdom and the actual or future risks of losing both tacit and embedded knowledge for specialist curating and conserving

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of textiles and dress. Tacit knowledge is generally considered to be the formal and informal knowledge embodied by individuals working for organized networks or institutions; that is, their specialist knowledge, understanding and skills whereas embedded knowledge is sustained by the processes, routines, and structures of an organization (Horvath 2000; Gamble and Blackwell 2001). Together, tacit and embedded knowledge contribute to the professional culture of an organization and play an important part in establishing and sustaining its corporate memory (Françoise et al. 2000). Erosion of such knowledge risks undermining established practices and standards. In the case of museums and conservation, the loss of curatorial and conservation expertise means that effective and appropriate interpretation, curation, collection development, preventive care, and conservation interventions cannot be sustained. The public's engagement with evocative and informative textile and dress collections for increased learning, knowledge, and enjoyment will, potentially, be lessened.

This article argues that these complex issues need to be addressed to sustain embedded expertise and influence decision making. It aims to unpack some of the issues involved by exploring pressures within the UK sector and focusing on three aspects of sustainability. These are (1) the economic threats to the museum and conservation sector with the associated risk of loss of curatorial and conservation knowledge and expertise, (2) the long-term sustainability of textile and dress collections and (3) the erosion of needlework skills in future generations. The article concludes with a case study of a Monument Fellowship that had the explicit aim of capturing and transferring embodied and embedded specialist knowledge.

2. WIDER VISIONS

Textile and dress collections and conservation would seem to have had much cause for celebration during the early years of the 21st century. In London, the British Museum's World Conservation and Exhibition Centre, funded by Britain's Heritage Lottery, opened in 2014 (British Museum n.d.). The Victoria & Albert Museum's new Centre for Textiles, Fashion Study and Conservation was launched in 2013 and funded by a charitable trust with its roots in a medieval textile guild (V&A n.d.). In Bangkok, the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles, supported by royal philanthropy and including Thailand's first textile conservation studio, opened its doors in 2003 (Brennan et al., n.d.). All have enhanced facilities and public access. Hugely popular exhibitions such as the Costume Institute's *Dangerous Liaisons* (Metropolitan Museum 2004) and the V&A's *Hollywood Costume* (V&A 2013) have been pushing display boundaries in innovative ways (Gatley and Morris 2015).

Conservators have also been energized by an expanded vision for the role for heritage conservation, using their technical expertise and knowledge to preserve collections, enhance understanding, and engage the public in this previously hidden process. Many projects have sought to aim to embed a wider social goal of individual and community well-being within conservation activities (Eastop 2006). The award-winning Volunteer Inclusion Project at London Archaeological Archive & Research Centre, Museum of London, is just one example of a project that engaged with the social benefits of conservation as well as actively caring for the museum's collection (Museum of London 2012).

Other projects have amply demonstrated conservators' ability to look beyond the individual object, collection, and institution and work together to analyze conservation problems on a major scale. *A Public Trust at Risk: The Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America's Collections* reported on 35,000 collecting institutions, establishing that immediate conservation action was needed to prevent the loss of 1290 million artifacts (Heritage Preservation 2005); a follow-up survey *Heritage Health Information* was undertaken in 2014, which again reviewed the position of collections and explored changes in preservation practices since the 2005 report (Heritage Preservation [2015]). Internationally, the ICCROM/UNESCO storage survey received responses

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from conservators and others from 1490 museums worldwide. In consequence of the universal problems recorded, they developed their Storage Reorganization Methodology as a tool for improving access and conservation (ICCR/UNESCO 2013). The UK's *Mind the Gap* project explored approaches for developing more rigorous collaborative interdisciplinary research approaches for improved understanding of both our material heritage and public impact (Dillon et al. 2014). Interestingly, Nancy Bell, head of collection care at The National Archives, UK, and principal investigator for the project, noted the importance of embodied knowledge, observing that although "technology is making collaboration easier, people remain central" for effective research (The National Archive 2014, n. p.). There have been powerful advocacy activities and publications such as *It's a Material World: Caring For the Public Realm* (Jones and Holden 2008), sponsored by the Textile Conservation Centre, and the Salzburg Declaration on the Conservation and Preservation of Cultural Heritage (Salzburg Global Seminar 2009).

The importance of communicating conservation has long been understood and is increasingly seen as a core activity, demonstrating conservators' contribution to interpretation, access, learning, and enjoyment in the museum as well as advocacy for the profession, a lever for funding, and, critically, a way of alerting and engaging potential future conservators (Pye 2001; Jones 2002; Brooks 2008; Gill 2012). New and old media are being used to reach new audiences. Kath Whittam, ICON's professional development support officer, noted that the BBC 1's television series *Fake or Fortune?*, which involves conservators in assessing the authenticity of paintings, "could do for conservation what *Time Team* did for archaeology" (Whittam 2014, n.p.). On site, conservators at Hampton Court Palace are wearing "Ask the Conservators" badges to encourage visitors to ask questions about the conservation work they see being carried out in the Palace (Frame 2008). Real and virtual exhibitions are being used to communicate the complexity of conservation decision making and practice. For example, the exhibition *Time Will Tell: Ethics and Choices in Conservation* at Yale focused on exploring conservation decision making (Yale University Art Gallery 2009). The conservation of William Etty's 1837 painting *The Sirens and Ulysses* was carried out in the galleries at Manchester Art Gallery to enable public involvement. An online legacy memorializes the challenging treatment (Manchester Art Gallery n.d.). AIC hosts a Wiki, an outcome of the outreach session "Exhibiting Ourselves" at the 2012 Meeting, which acts as a resource for conservators planning outreach activities. It includes a database of exhibitions engaging with conservation, conservation science, or technical art history (AIC 2013).

3. RAISING THE PROFILE

It appears that the profession is doing all it should be doing—developing the public profile, explaining the discipline in creative and engaging ways, working with communities as well as collections and individuals as well as artifacts, and justifiably celebrating some remarkable projects. Such activity and achievement do not seem to be translating into a confident profession. Instead, there seems to be a somewhat paradoxical sense of slippage in the status of conservation and of increasing threats to its future, despite the new understanding of an expanded role for heritage conservation in enriching people's lives and experiences. As Elizabeth Pye and Dean Sully of the Institute of Archaeology, London, put it: "conservators may suffer from a crisis of confidence: they may feel the traditional skills that define the identity of conservators are not valued by institutional managers or funding managers, or are no longer relevant" (Pye and Sully 2007, 19).

These are complex shifts that are not always comfortable. There are many implications for how conservators regard themselves, how conservators are regarded, the often-problematic reality of institutional experience, recognition, and funding as well as for the education and training of the next generation of conservators.

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4. AT THE TIPPING POINT?

Since 2009, England has been experiencing deep and lasting year-on-year cuts with local authority budgets reduced by 7.1% each year over four years (Museums Association 2014). Overall, cuts have resulted in a £4-million reduction in museum funding, which has in turn resulted in reduced core and grant funding for national and regional museums. Museums are closing, and budget cuts are reducing staffing levels. Conservation courses have closed, the rising costs of completing a professional conservation qualification are sadly accompanied by increasing difficulty in finding permanent positions, and those jobs that do exist are often temporary contracts. Despite the investment, even the future of the building housing the V&A Clothworker's Centre is now "being assessed by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) as part of a wider government drive to get value for money from its estate" (Stephens 2014a). The UK's Museums Association (MA) has been tracking the impact of the cuts. Between 2005 and 2014, 85% of the respondents reported staff cuts (Newman and Tourle 2011). Specialist curatorial posts, including textile curators, are being lost as are conservation posts although these are only included in the MA's survey under the category "other" (fig. 1); however, Prospect, which represents over 6,000 heritage professionals, noted that the sector is near "the tipping point" and notes that conservation posts are under particular threat (Stephens 2014b; Prospect 2014). Without combined curatorial and conservation expertise, effective planning and interventions for collection development and preventive care cannot be sustained.

We run the risk of moving toward a contract culture where conservators are brought in for specific tasks rather than being an essential part of the museum process. The underlying implication that conservation is seen as a technical fix needs to be examined. In some institutions, conservation seems neither to be valued for being a process that involves skill, long-term embedded knowledge, and expertise about the collection and the building nor for contributing to the museum's curatorial, educational and social goals. Furthermore, despite some shining exceptions, conservators are not necessarily perceived as being "management material." To be fair, many may not have this as a goal, preferring (legitimately) to concentrate on objects and collections. In 2001, Tim Shadla Hall, reader in public archaeology, University College London, voiced concerns about "the

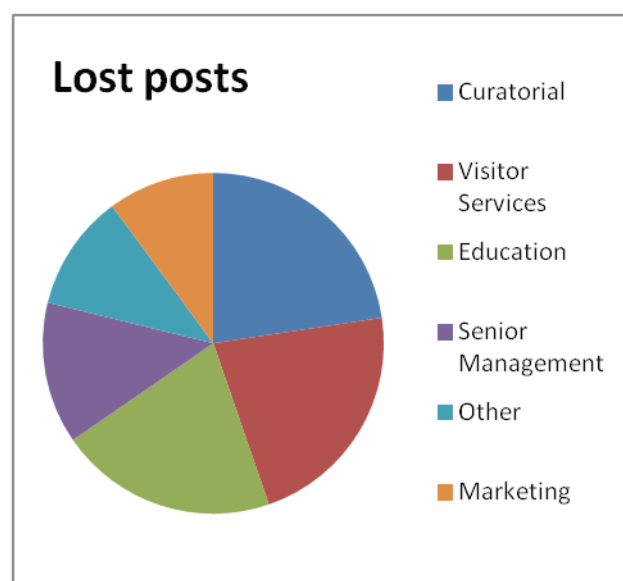


Figure 1: Museums reporting on areas of expertise affected by decreases in staffing since April 2010 (140 respondents); based on Newman and Tourle, *The Impact of Cuts on UK Museums*, 2011.

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relatively low esteem in which conservation is held” (cited by Jones 2002). This view persists: “Conservation, though... once you’ve established the protocol, it’s just glorified housework” (Jamie 2012). But this is a salutary insight into perceptions of the profession and its contribution.

The 2012–2013 ICON *Conservation Labour Market Survey* showed there were 3,175 professional conservators in the UK plus 2,500 support staff and volunteers but also revealed shortages of specialist conservation skills and significant gaps in transferable skills like leadership, business, project management, and IT (ICON 2013). It also demonstrated how lack of recognition flows into salary structures. The median wage for the conservation workforce is lower than for comparable professional occupations (£26,000 compared to £36,359), and the cuts have also been having an effect here. One fifth of respondents reported that salaries had fallen by 10% since January 2012, whereas a further 44% noted that salaries had remained unchanged—a fall in real terms.

5. SUSTAINING TEXTILES AND DRESS COLLECTIONS AND CONSERVATION

National and regional textile and dress collections and conservation facilities, despite some notable exceptions, are being adversely affected by reductions in central and local government funding with resulting closures and relocations (table 1).

Table 1: Closures and relocations of UK textile and dress collections and conservation organizations, 2009–2013

Organization	Date of closure
Textile Conservation Centre	Closed December 2009 (textile conservation course now at University of Glasgow)
National Conservation Centre, Liverpool (included textile conservation)	Closed December 2010
Silk Mill Museum	Closed June 2011
Carrow Hall Costume and Textile Study Centre	Closed July 2011
Women’s Library, London (Suffragette banner collection)	Closed October 2012 (Collections moved to London School of Economics)
National Museum of Costume, Scotland	Closed April 2013

Underlying these decisions made by directors and trustee boards is the significance and value placed on textiles and textile conservation as an integral part of institutions and the commitment to long-term collection preservation, interpretation, and communication. Even when posts were more secure, few textile specialists, either curators or conservators, became higher level managers so decision-making about collections and recruitment could be made by those without insight into the potential of textiles and dress for telling stories through objects and engaging different publics interested in history, science, trade, and politics. It is all too easy for collections requiring specific specialist display and storage strategies and investment to slip off the priorities list when museums are under pressure. Paradoxically, textile conservation may still be perceived as either domestic “housekeeping,” requiring no specialist knowledge beyond the ability to launder, or an expensive and highly technical block to access. The issue of training the next generation also needs to be considered. New opportunities are opening up, such as the *Skills for Future* program at The Bowes Museum, but entry to conservation programs remains competitive despite a shrinking job market (Bowes Museum 2014).

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6. GENDER, TEXTILES, AND NEEDLEWORK SKILLS

Although men have long been involved in the textile and garment industries, in Western cultures needlework skills are particularly associated with girls and women. This is a heritage to be proud of, but it is also a limitation. Their very ubiquity and anonymity has contributed to their low ranking in the fine and decorative art hierarchy. Despite enormous shifts in attitudes, the study of textiles and dress is still not regarded by all as a serious discipline, and, although hard to quantify, a gendered view of textiles, dress and their audiences persists.

The account of the visit made by children from Ropley Church of England School to Guildford Museum's Victorian Schoolroom is revealing. Transplanted into the lives of 19th century schoolchildren, their teacher reported that:

"... girls and boys were once more separated; us females plodding down the stairs... to see Emily awaiting. She explained to us how valuable it was to know how to sew in the nineteenth century. Apparently, it was a useful skill as you could derive much profit from it (either by sewing clothes, darning, etc.) ... For that day though, we just had a shot at cross stitch which proved to be a challenge" (Lloyd 2013).

As these 20th century girls—significantly only girls—discovered, needlework skills could be a domestic and financial benefit. What is equally revealing is the girls' (and, incidentally, their teacher's) lack of familiarity with basic stitches. It is possible to track the changes in the UK National Curriculum and see needlework being steadily removed (National STEM Centre n.d.). This has an impact on textile conservation programs as, although they may have much to offer in other areas, fewer students are likely to arrive with high levels of needlework skills. Television programs such as *The Great British Sewing Bee* certainly demonstrate that people lack sewing skills but also show positive engagement with needlework (BBC2 2013). Activities such as the Embroiders Guild's *The Big Stitch* celebrating 'all things embroidered ...' are hugely successful (Ashmolean Museum 2012). The 2012 and 2014 events at the Ashmolean Museum were besieged by enthusiastic stitchers, exploring historical embroidery, adding stitches to the world's longest embroidery, attending demonstrations, and working on their own projects.

7. MONUMENT FELLOWSHIP

In 2010–11, I held a Monument Fellowship at York Castle Museum (YCM) where I had previously worked as assistant keeper of textiles & dress (conservation). The vision behind these Fellowships, administered by the Museum Association and funded by the Monument Trust, a Sainsbury Family Charitable Trust, is to ensure sustainability of embodied and embedded knowledge by enabling transfer of knowledge from previous to current staff (Museums Association n.d.). YCM no longer has conservators on staff, and the specially constructed laboratories are no longer dedicated to conservation. The specialist textiles and dress curatorial post no longer exists.

The "Talking Textiles" project focused on working with colleagues who had not previously been engaged with the YCM textile and dress collections or had worked with conservators. It aimed to develop their understanding of these collections with the broader aim of enhancing public understanding and enjoyment of the textiles and dress collections, thus demonstrating their value to the museum and the benefits of specialist conservation knowledge. I ran workshops on fibers and fashion, created resource packs that integrated evidence from my previous conservation treatments into the curatorial record, and we made videos and podcasts discussing parts of the textiles and dress collection. The idea was to encourage curators and museum educators

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to see conservation as a valid way of understanding objects and make connections across collections using textiles and dress as a jumping-off point. It is important to recognize that boundaries of professional expertise still remained, reflecting the nature of specific disciplines, the tasks involved, and the requirements of professional standards so decisions are made by those with the appropriate qualifications and expertise.

8. SUMMARY

Conservators have to draw strength from our unique engagement with objects and the power this gives us to engage with the public that “has increasingly become an essential partner in safeguarding our shared cultural heritage” (ICOM-CC 2008 n.p.). This enables us to demonstrate the multiple values of conservation in preserving and interpreting cultural heritage—and show others that it is intriguing and fascinating. It is vital to demonstrate that we are part of an enabling discipline and a culturally meaningful activity that adds to the pleasure and understanding of museum visitors and enhances knowledge for researchers. This will create a virtuous circle, attracting high calibre entrants who need to be offered well-funded programs and be assured of appropriate prospects and rewards including meaningful professional development and research opportunities.

In organizational terms, enhancing conservators’ potential for leadership and management is vital. We need to continue our efforts to build a creative, constructive conservation profession capable of convincing colleagues, politicians, and policymakers of our value. The example of ecological conservators may be helpful here: think global, act local. Identify one thing—large or small or a step toward a bigger project—which you or your department can do over the course of a year and build it onto the program. Make sure people know what you are doing and why, and what you have achieved. And, throughout all this, we have to collaborate and communicate with bodies outside the conservation profession, including key decision-makers and influencers. None of this is new thinking, but the current crisis makes it more urgent. To sustain embedded expertise and influence decision-making, it is important to build on our many achievements, think big, challenge preconceptions about the intellectual, historical, and emotional appeal of textiles and dress, and find new collaborators and innovative approaches to demonstrate our unique contribution.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Simon Cane, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery; Dr. Dinah Eastop, consultant, conservation and heritage studies; Dr. Chris Caple, Durham University; Ann French, Whitworth Art Gallery; Frances Lennard, University of Glasgow.

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